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“We Must Get In Front of These Blighters”: Political Press Culture in the West Midlands, 1918-1925.

In his study of the political press in the twentieth century, Stephen Koss noted that if his work neglected provincial newspapers it was because they had ‘received short shrift in reality’.¹ His implication was that political parties wished to utilize the growing national (London) press and saw little use for provincial titles. Certainly, there are several studies which have demonstrated that the sale of national newspapers, such as the *Daily Mail*, grew rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s.² Not only did the national press expand, the market was increasingly dominated by a small number of press groups. By the late 1930s they accounted for 43% of press ownership.³ Colin Seymour-Ure argued that the content of the provincial press became less partisan in this period and, with the growth of national newspapers, there was a decline in the abilities of political parties to express ‘regional particularism’.⁴ Matthew Dawson agreed that these processes, in addition to the use of the wireless, weakened the relationship between politics and the provincial press after 1918.⁵

Whilst historians agree that the sale of national newspapers increased, the extent to which they dominated has been challenged. Tom O’Malley questioned the definition of the term ‘national’ which he sees as being too generalised for the interwar period.⁶ He referred to several issues, such as the lack of appeal to female readers, and the regional variations in

¹ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain Volume Two: The Twentieth Century* (London: Hamilton, 1984), 3.

² Jon Lawrence, *Electing Our Masters: The Hustings in British Politics from Hogarth to Blair* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 101; Adrian Bingham, ‘An Organ of Uplift?’ *Journalism Studies* 14/5 (2013), 651-662, 651.

³ Graham Murdock, Peter Goulding, ‘The structure, ownership and control of the press, 1914-1976’, in George Boyce, James Curran, Pauline Wingate, eds., *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth century to the Present Day* (London: Constable, 1978), 130-148, 134-135. For a more recent analysis of press amalgamations see Rachel Matthews, *The History of the Provincial Press in England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 115-122.

⁴ Colin Seymour-Ure, ‘The Press and the Party System between the Wars’, in Gillian Peele, Chris Cook, eds., *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 232-257, 238.

⁵ Matthew Dawson, ‘Party Politics and the Provincial Press in Early Twentieth Century England: The Case of the South West’, *Twentieth Century British History* 9/2 (1998), 201-218, 217.

⁶ Tom O’Malley, ‘Was there a National Press in the UK in the Second World War?’, *Media History* 23/3-4 (2017), 508-530, 508.

national circulation figures, which prevented the 'national' press from living up to its namesake.⁷ Rachel Matthews has noted that prior to the move of the *Manchester Guardian* to London in the 1950s, 'the London daily papers could hardly claim national circulation.'⁸ Furthermore, there were several instances in the 1920s where the relationship between the press and political parties resembled Victorian and Edwardian practices. These included the ownership of newspapers by politicians, such as those owned by the Rowntree family and the 'Starmer group', and partisanship between competing newspapers, as in the case of the Liberal *North Devon Journal* and the Conservative/Unionist *North Devon Herald*.⁹ These examples provide evidence for the continued importance of the provincial press after the First World War.

Additionally, studies have shown that the provincial press remained a crucial part of local identity. Michael Bromley and Nick Hayes argued that the commerce-driven local press in the 1920s provided '*the ubiquitous civic voice*; vital yet distanced from partisanship, or the reputed banality, of former or later years'.¹⁰ Moreover, Rachel Matthews argued that the amalgamations of press ownership 'did not preclude an editorial stance which influenced the creation of civic identity.'¹¹ Hence, the provincial press became a greater part of the community in these years as it strove to provide news to its readers. Bromley and Hayes further noted that the legitimacy of the provincial press was based on five factors: the amount of local content; the degree to which the paper was locally owned and maintained; inclusiveness of its target market; circulation area; and financial standing.¹² However, the history of the medium requires more study to provide a greater understanding of its relationship to the localities it represented in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, there have recently been calls for more research of print culture in this period.¹³ An analysis of the

⁷ O'Malley, 'Was there a National Press in the UK in the Second World War?', 515.

⁸ Matthews, *The History of the Provincial Press in England*, 21.

⁹ For the Rowntree family and the 'Starmer Group' see Paul Gliddon, 'The Political Importance of Provincial Newspapers, 1903-45: The Rowntrees and the Liberal Press', *Twentieth Century British History* 14/1 (2003), 24-42. For the partisanship of the *North Devon Herald* and the *North Devon Journal* see Dawson, 'Party Politics and the Provincial Press', 208.

¹⁰ Matthew Bromley and Nick Hayes, 'Campaigner, Watchdog, or Municipal Lackey? Reflections on the Inter-War Provincial Press, Local Identity and Civic Welfarism', *Media History* 8/2 (2002), 197-212, 197.

¹¹ Matthews, *The History of the Provincial Press in England*, 135.

¹² Bromley and Hayes, 'Campaigner, Watchdog, or Municipal Lackey?', 199.

¹³ See Annemarie McAllister and Andrew Hobbs, 'Introduction', *The International Journal of Regional and Local Studies* 5/1 (2009), 5-15, 10.

West Midlands press in the immediate post-war years will provide a test case as to whether there truly was a decline in the influence of the press in local and regional areas.

The vibrant press culture of the West Midlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century has been particularly overlooked both by local historians and historians of the press. In an article in a recent edited collection, one of the current authors sought to correct this oversight by investigating the fecundity of the satirical press in the later Victorian period in Birmingham and its impact on the public perception of Joseph Chamberlain both regionally and nationally.¹⁴ Further investigation has revealed that the Labour party, often regarded as unusually under-developed in the city at the turn of the century, actually attempted to use this well-established tradition of satirical periodicals to enhance its identity in the city. In June 1902, the Birmingham Socialist Centre's (BSC) executive committee approved the proposal by 'a number of members of the Centre [...] to purchase the *Town Crier*'.¹⁵ This was undertaken as part of the local Labour party's attempt to prevent the privatisation of the new Birmingham tram service by the British Electrical Traction company. The *Town Crier* was the most venerable (and, by then, the least popular) of the Birmingham satirical periodicals having been founded by a collective of civic-minded Liberals including George Dawson in 1861, but it had been quickly supplanted in the city's affections by more scurrilous, more visual and less respectful papers such as the *Dart* and the *Owl* (which were Unionist and Liberal respectively by 1902).¹⁶

The move was a bold one for an inexperienced and relatively poorly funded body such as the BSC as previous experiments with a newspaper entitled the *Labour Standard* had failed earlier in 1902 after only four months of publication.¹⁷ Such was the popularity of the satirical journal as a means of political engagement in Birmingham that perhaps the BSC

¹⁴ Ian Cawood and Chris Upton, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the Birmingham Satirical Press', in Ian Cawood, Chris Upton, eds., *Joseph Chamberlain: International Statesman, National Leader and Local Icon* (London: Palgrave, 2016), pp. 176-210.

¹⁵ Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, XC 9/2/1, Birmingham Socialist Centre minutes 1902-1912, 'Executive meeting', 20 June 1902.

¹⁶ Despite the formation of the 'Conservative and Unionist Party' in May 1912, parts of the West Midlands remained distinctly 'Unionist'. This reflected the popularity of Joseph Chamberlain in Birmingham and other parts of the region. After 1918, the term was still employed in the region's press with 'Unionist' also becoming increasingly employed by the national party in the inter-war years. See Stuart Ball, *Portrait of a Party: The Conservative Party in Britain: 1918-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 68

¹⁷ Peter Drake, 'The *Town Crier*: Birmingham's Labour Weekly, 1919-1951', in Anthony Wright and Richard Shackleton, eds., *Worlds of Labour: Essays in Birmingham Labour History* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1983), 103-127, 104.

felt that this was a more promising venture. The first edition of the journal under the editorship of J. D. Shallard, the BSC secretary, appeared on 12 July 1902 and was at first sight, barely distinguishable from the previous week's edition. However, a prominent advert for the *Clarion* newspaper and an overt attack on the British Electrical Traction company marked a change in editorial tone in a magazine that had trumpeted the benefits of privatisation only a few months earlier.¹⁸ Sadly the only immediate response to this change of tone appears to have been by the *Town Crier's* advertisers and in the following months, companies such as Mitchells and Butlers, whisky distillers, spirit sellers, gun manufacturers, banks and cigar salesmen ceased to market their wares in the magazine. By early 1903 only cocoa sellers, bicycle companies, Beecham's pills and patent medicine peddlers were advertising, though it is not certain if ethical objections by Quaker supporters of Labour may have resulted in a refusal of the paper to carry adverts from gunsmiths, brewers and spirit-dealers. The paper briefly rallied following Joseph Chamberlain's dramatic adoption of Tariff Reform and resignation from the Unionist Cabinet in 1903, as it lambasted the former mayor for adopting a policy of 'Zollverein', associated with the cartels and authoritarian regime of the 'Kaiserreich' in Germany.¹⁹ This was not sufficient to halt the decline, however, and the last number of the pre-war *Town Crier* was published on 10 July 1903, almost exactly a year since the first issue published by the BSC. Although the Centre's minutes only obliquely refer to the progress of the paper, it is clear that the scale of the challenge of operating a weekly magazine had been underestimated and that Shallard's attempt to run both the *Town Crier* and the BSC had proved unsustainable.²⁰ W. J. Chamberlain, who revived the paper in 1919 claimed then that defeat of the privatisers and the municipalisation of Birmingham's trams 'was regarded as the completion of the work of the *Town Crier*'²¹ but the *Town Crier's* long-standing rival the *Dart* noted 'it ought not to have been started as a weekly' by its new owners.²² The problem of combining the editing of a weekly newspaper and carrying out political duties as a party officer would prove equally challenging to the editors of successive political papers in the inter-war years.

¹⁸ Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, LBF 08.2 961152. *Town Crier*, 12 July 1902; *Town Crier*, 1 March 1902.

¹⁹ *Town Crier*, 19 June 1903.

²⁰ Birmingham Socialist Centre minutes 1902-12; December 1902; 29 January 1903; 7 September 1903.

²¹ Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, LB 76.22, *Town Crier*, no. 1, 3 October 1919

²² *Dart*, 26 October 1903.

The post-war politics of the West Midlands were marked by press battles rather than by the physical electoral confrontations which had survived into the Edwardian polity.²³ The *Birmingham Daily Post* (which became merely the *Birmingham Post* on 21 May 1918) had been a long-standing supporter of the Chamberlain family, having shifted from radical to Unionist with Joseph Chamberlain in 1886 and then adopting Tariff Reform two years after Chamberlain announced his conversion to the cause in 1903.²⁴ The *Post*, with an estimated circulation of 40,000, was hugely influential when it adopted a hostile tone towards the Labour movement from the moment the war ended, with an editorial at the time of the 1918 'Coupon' election in which it was stated that Labour 'is being run by an extreme pacifist, Bolshevik group.'²⁵ The sister paper of the *Post*, the *Birmingham Mail*, was equally fervent in its Unionism, however, as it was largely a working class paper with an even higher circulation than the *Post*, it attempted to disguise this through a more balanced approach towards the Liberals and Labour. But, just as Laura Beers has recently explored in her studies of the national press in this period, the *Mail* became more partisan as the 1920s progressed and industrial tension and domestic division over Soviet Russia rose.²⁶ The general manager of the *Post* and *Mail*, Charles Hyde, personally supported an accommodation with the Labour movement, but he was soon disillusioned by the actions of the 1924 MacDonald government and the General Strike and his papers became implacable opponents of the Labour party and he personally donated funds to the local Unionist Association.²⁷ However, the shifting position of the *Post* and *Mail* may simply have reflected the fluctuating mood of public opinion towards the Labour Party in the fluid first half of the

²³ Ian Cawood, 'Life after Joe: Politics and War in the West Midlands, 1914-1918', *Midland History* 42/1 (2017), 92-117.

²⁴ Harold Richard Grant Whates, *The Birmingham Post 1857: 1957: a Centenary Retrospect* (Birmingham: Birmingham Post and Mail, 1957), 178-79; Henry Miller, 'Print, Politics and Public Opinion: Newspapers in the Nineteenth Century', *History West Midlands* 3 (2013), 26-28.

²⁵ *Birmingham Post*, 14 December 1918.

²⁶ Laura Beers, 'Education or Manipulation? Labour Democracy and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain', *Journal of British Studies* 48/1 (2009), 129-152, 131; Laura Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Labour Party* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 50-68. Following the collapse of the Triple Alliance, the *Mail* printed a cartoon showing an impoverished working class family. 'Why don't you go back to work?' asks the wife holding an infant. 'Because the trade union leaders won't let me' replies the husband. *Birmingham Mail*, 17 April 1921.

²⁷ Whates, *The Birmingham Post 1857: 1957*, 190-97; Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 29 May 1920, NC18/1/258; Walter Barrow to Neville Chamberlain, 5 October 1938, NC5/8/68

1920s. As Matthews concluded, the provincial press was primarily a profit-focused industry which only adopted a public service role to legitimize its financial interests.²⁸

The only non-Unionist voice in the city by 1918 was the weekly *Birmingham Gazette*, owned by close allies of the Rowntree family, J. B. Morrell and Charles Starmer, who had converted it from an arch-Tory to a Liberal paper in November 1912 to join the rest of the Westminster Press Group.²⁹ By the end of the war, it supported the Asquithian Liberal party but had backed Labour in Birmingham since the split in the Liberal Party in 1916 and the virtual collapse of the Birmingham Liberal organisation.³⁰ The city's Labour party had itself split over conscription and the pacifist element had taken control. In the November 1918 'Coupon election', the Birmingham Labour Party had put up sympathetic fellow pacifists as candidates, many of whom were also outspoken socialists. The result was catastrophic with no Labour candidates elected and some failing to gain even 20% of the vote. This was in marked contrast to the success of more moderate Labour figures in the Black Country and Staffordshire and a very creditable showing in unlikely targets for Labour such as Shrewsbury and Oswestry. As in 1902, the timing of the re-launch of the *Town Crier* in October 1919 was therefore no accident. The Birmingham Labour party realised that they needed to build a local following and the paper was launched with W. J. Chamberlain as editor and chief copy-writer, chiefly to ensure a good result in the Birmingham municipal elections of November 1919. As Mike Savage and Chris Cook have established, after 1918 the Labour party prioritised progress in municipal elections fought on issues of local services and for this they needed a voice in the city.³¹

W. J. Chamberlain had come to Birmingham in 1918 as he had been imprisoned in Winchester gaol as a conscientious objector during the war. Chamberlain had worked on the

²⁸ Matthews, *The History of the Provincial Press in England*, x.

²⁹ M. T. Gammage, 'The *Birmingham Daily Gazette*: A Case Study in the History of the Conservative Provincial Press 1862-1914' *West Midland Studies*, 13 (1980), 29-33, 30; Ian Packer, ed., *The Letters of Arnold Stephenson Rowntree to Mary Katherine Rowntree, 1910-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10; Ian Packer, 'A Curious Exception? The Lincolnshire Chronicle and the "Starmer group"', *Journalism Studies* 7/3 (2006), 415-426, 417.

³⁰ Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, 329.94249LAB, Birmingham Central Labour Party minute book, 1918-1919, 14 August 1919; *Town Crier*, 3 October 1919; Drake, 'The *Town Crier*', 104-8.

³¹ Mike Savage, 'Urban Politics and the Rise of the Labour Party, 1919-39', in Lynn Jamieson and Helen Corr, eds., *State, Private Life and Political Change* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 204-23; Chris Cook, 'Liberals, Labour and Local Elections', in Gillian Peele and Chris Cook, eds., *The Politics of Reappraisal, 1918-1939* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1975), 166-88.

Daily Citizen and was keen to continue his career as a journalist. He managed to persuade Fred Rudland, the secretary of the Birmingham Trades Council and a printer by trade, that the local party needed to start a paper. The £150 required to fund the venture was provided by the chief financiers of the pacifist Labour movement, the Quaker shopkeepers Harrison Barrow and Joseph Southall. In his initial editorial (under the pseudonym 'The Watchman'), Chamberlain confessed (in the third person) that he struggled for a name for the new paper,

He was rather tired of the usual "Pioneer", "Forward," "Worker," and so on through the range of stereotyped titles, and spent many sleepless nights searching for something new under the sun [...] Mr Harrison Barrow came along to that meeting with the offer of the copyright of "The Town Crier" and the Committee jumped at it. And here we are!³²

The Birmingham Labour Party realised that a focus on 'housing, our Municipal Services [...] Gas and Tram charges and the elimination of a narrow, selfish policy' would appeal very effectively to the municipal electorate.³³ In its first issue on 3 October 1919, the *Town Crier* published 'a manifesto of the Birmingham Labour Party' with a focus on the issues of housing, the rating system, a demand for more municipal services, expansion of education and open access to Birmingham's markets **[fig. 1]**³⁴

³² The *Town Crier*, 3 October 1919; Drake, 'The Town Crier: Birmingham's Labour Weekly, 1919-1951', 106-7. Barrow had been one of the members of the Birmingham Socialist Centre who had paid to for the purchase of the original Town Crier in 1902.

³³ Birmingham Central Labour Party minute book, 1918-1919, 27 June 1919.

³⁴ The *Town Crier*, 3 October 1919.



Figure 1. The *Town Crier*, new series, no. 1, 3 October 1919

Chamberlain was also determined to avoid accusations of left-wing extremism, criticising striking railway workers at a mass meeting at Smithfield market for their hostility towards representatives of the *Birmingham Mail* and *Birmingham Post* as a result of their newspapers having printed anti-strike cartoons. Chamberlain also praised the *Birmingham Gazette*'s 'sympathetic' reporting of the strike, even though he admitted 'I loathe the politics of the *Gazette*.'³⁵ The paper also wittily debunked one of the more extreme right-wing attacks on Labour, as it bemoaned the financial pressures on the party, 'Bolshie gold not having come to hand.'³⁶ Although the influence of the *Town Crier* is impossible to determine, there was a significant increase in the Labour vote in November 1919 and the party won twelve of the twenty municipal seats contested in Birmingham (as well as a third

³⁵ The *Town Crier*, 10 October 1919. Chamberlain later explained, that as a pacifist, imprisoned during the war he resented 'the silence of Mr. Asquith while papers were being suppressed and our prisons were packed with honest men.' The *Town Crier*, 17 October 1919.

³⁶ The *Town Crier*, 3 October 1919.

of the seats in Coventry municipal elections).³⁷ The significance of the municipal elections remained a crucial feature in the political press war in the city in the 1920s.

As David Thackeray has commented, little of the Unionist response to this challenge has been studied.³⁸ Neville Chamberlain had emerged as the leading figure in Birmingham Unionism during the war and he was not satisfied by the support given by the *Post* and the *Mail* in the 1919 municipal campaign. He consequently met with Hubbard and Harvey (the respective editors) before the 1920 election.³⁹ The minutes of the Birmingham Unionist Association (BUA) Management Committee revealed the true relations between the Unionist press and Chamberlain as both editors assured him that 'they were quite anxious to do better this year.'⁴⁰ The Management Committee, worried by the impact of the *Town Crier* in the city, went further and announced the 'urgent need for the issue of a Unionist paper in the Division' in March 1920 to rival the *Town Crier*.⁴¹ The Publication Sub-committee duly discussed the 'need for a local Unionist publication of some kind to counter-act the Socialistic propaganda which was, at the moment, the only form of political literature which was finding its way into the houses of the people.' The question of whether this was to be a party newsletter or a full newspaper (in the style of the *Town Crier*) revealed the limited ambitions of the Sub-committee, for it was decided that 'it should be as local as possible, giving reports of as to all the local doings of the Party'. The title suggested was one issued by Joseph Chamberlain's local association in West Birmingham as a four page broadsheet before the war: *Straightforward*.⁴² The Unionists also suffered from a lack of newspaper experience, with the Chairman of the Sub-committee, John Bedford Burman, having to explain the process of distribution of newspapers to his colleagues and the Committee unable to identify the necessary print run to cover the city other than as

³⁷ *Town Crier*, 7 November 1919; Library of Birmingham, Archives and Heritage Service, 329.94249 Con, Birmingham Unionist Association (hereafter BUA) Executive Committee minutes, 21 November 1919; Peter Walters, *Great War Britain: Coventry, Remembering 1914-1918* (Stroud: The History Press, 2016), 136.

³⁸ David Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age: Conservative Cultures and the Challenge of Mass Politics in Early Twentieth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 4.

³⁹ Chamberlain met with Hubbard on 11 January 1920, Neville Chamberlain to Hilda and Ida Chamberlain, Neville Chamberlain Papers, Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham, NC18/1/239. Charles Hyde, the owner of the *Post* visited Chamberlain in May 1920. Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain NC18/1/258, 29 May 1920.

⁴⁰ BUA Management Committee minutes, 8 October 1920.

⁴¹ BUA Management Committee minutes, 15 March 1920.

⁴² BUA Publication Sub-committee minutes, 31 March 1920. This name was confirmed by the BUA Management Committee in May 1920, BUA Management Committee minutes, 28 May 1920.

somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 copies.⁴³ The Sub-committee were also astonished at the cost of running a paper and realised that a run of twelve monthly issues would require £1,000 from the Management Committee.⁴⁴ When they drafted their report to the Committee in May 1920, the Publication Sub-committee also realised that they would 'be necessary to engage some person of [journalistic] experience' to write the paper. They also blithely assumed, seemingly on the basis of market research, that companies would wish to advertise in the paper.⁴⁵ Trevor Jones, of the *Birmingham Mail*, was proposed as 'sub'-editor but was unable to be named as full editor as his employment at the *Mail* prevented his involvement with a partisan publication and Burman, who had trained and worked as a journalist in Birmingham and had inherited his father's printing company since the 1880s, was named as editor instead.⁴⁶ The Management Committee responded that they were worried by 'the extraordinarily heavy cost of printing' and would only advance the funds if a small limited company, comprised of the senior members of the Publication Sub-committee was formed.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, the first issue, costing one penny, was printed by Percival Jones Ltd and sold in September 1920 with a mission statement 'to expose false prophets who seek to delude ignorant people' and a cartoon showing a Unionist car attempting to overtake a Labour charabanc with the caption 'We must get in front these Blighters. [fig. 2]'⁴⁸

⁴³ BUA Publication Sub-committee minutes, 31 March 1920; 12 April 1920. In the event, only 10,000 copies of the first issue were printed. BUA Publication Sub-committee minutes, 16 April 1920. The pre-war title was *Straightforward* and the post-war title was *Straight Forward*.

⁴⁴ BUA Publication Sub-committee minutes, 16 April 1920. W. J. Chamberlain appeared to have a spy in the Unionist camp as he gleefully reported later in the year that 'seven true-blue Tories of Birmingham formed themselves into the "Straight Forward Publishing Company, Ltd.," with a capital of £1,000, and set about producing an anti-Labour monthly, which was to essay the task of counteracting the pernicious influence of the *Town Crier*' *Town Crier*, 10 September 1920.

⁴⁵ BUA Publication Sub-committee draft report, 19 May 1920.

⁴⁶ BUA Publication Sub-committee minutes, 25 June 1920; *Straight Forward*, April 1921; Burman's irrelevance to the editing of the magazine was illustrated in early 1922, when the Management Committee confessed that he had been 'abroad for some time, but during his absence, the paper had been carried on with its usual "go"', BUA Central Committee minutes, 17 March 1922.

⁴⁷ BUA Management Committee minutes, 15 October 1920.

⁴⁸ Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, LF 76.21, *Straight Forward*, September 1920.

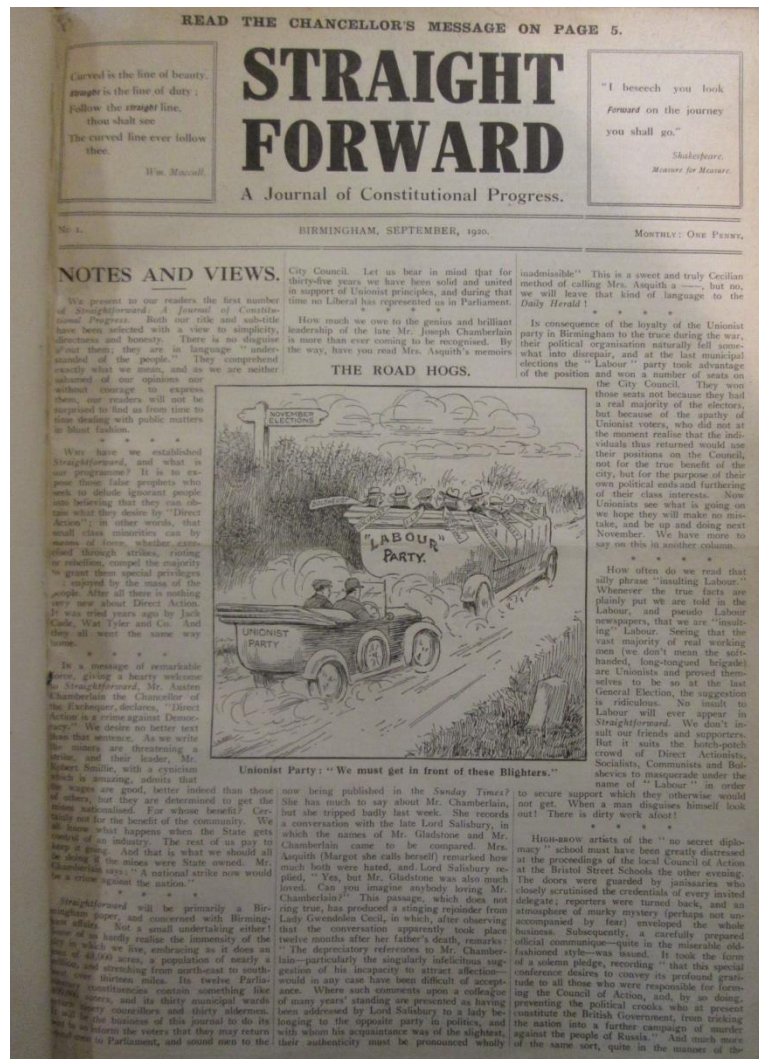


Figure 2. *Straight Forward*, no. 1. September 1920

The Management Committee noted their approval and even overlooked the tiny number of subscriptions (220) that had been taken up by the time of the second issue in October 1920.⁴⁹ The Liberal *Birmingham Gazette* was not impressed, however, commenting wryly, 'if *Straight Forward* is a measure of Unionist intelligence in Birmingham, then the progressive forces, Liberal or Labour, ought to soon break that thirty-five year political monopoly.'⁵⁰

This activity appeared to bear political fruit, however, as the Unionists successfully improved their performance in the 1920 municipal elections in which they won six seats from Labour and only lost two (both in Aston), a performance that the *Birmingham Gazette*

⁴⁹ BUA Management Committee report to the Central Committee, 15 October 1920.

⁵⁰ *Birmingham Gazette*, 3 September 1920.

described as a 'surprise result'.⁵¹ Neville Chamberlain duly recorded his satisfaction with the 'very material assistance' that the *Post* and *Mail* had been given to Unionist candidates.⁵² To further underline the significance of political print culture in the first days of a democratic polity, the Unionist Association then established a full Propaganda Committee in 1921 to promote a nuanced message suited to the working men and women of the city.⁵³

As many studies of press history reveal, however, commencing a newspaper is an easier challenge than sustaining one. As early as January 1921, Burman was warning that *Straight Forward* was losing £20 on every issue and that within the paper's first four months, advertisement revenue 'had fallen to the value of £36 on the last issue' but the Management Committee felt that the political benefits were worth the financial burden and Burman was ordered to 'proceed with its publication.'⁵⁴ Burman did manage to persuade the city's public libraries to agree to take copies of the journal and, as a reward, he and the other directors of *Straight Forward* were appointed to a new 'Press Sub-committee' whose task it was to keep the editors of the *Post* and *Mail* 'in touch with matters connected with Municipal and Parliamentary organisation.'⁵⁵ When, in September 1921, Burman reported an overall cost to the Association of £226 for the publication of twelve issues of the newspaper, he was authorised to continue publication for another twelve months.⁵⁶ The loss of four council seats (three to Labour and one to the Liberals) in the 1921 municipal elections as the effects of the post-war downturn were felt in the city, meant that the Unionist propaganda effort had to be maintained.⁵⁷ The BUA was also perturbed by the publication of a national Unionist newspaper, the *Popular View*, which first appeared in May 1921. It was intended that local branches would adapt the *Popular View* and 'localise' it with the addition of their own inserts, but the directors of *Straight Forward* proposed that the *Popular View* should merely be an insert in their publication.⁵⁸ The decision was taken, however, to maintain Birmingham's traditionally independent position within the Unionist movement and to continue to publish *Straight Forward* 'in its present form and to preserve

⁵¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 2 November 1920.

⁵² BUA Management Committee minutes, 12 November 1920

⁵³ BUA Executive Committee minutes, 21 November 1921.

⁵⁴ BUA Management Committee minutes, 14 January 1921.

⁵⁵ BUA Management Committee minutes, 8 April 1921.

⁵⁶ BUA Management Committee minutes, 9 September 1921.

⁵⁷ *Birmingham Gazette*, 2 November 1921.

⁵⁸ BUA Central Committee minutes, 10 June 1921.

its Birmingham identity.⁵⁹ Judging from the minutes of the BUA, however, the paper was somewhat neglected in 1922, with Burman first abroad for several months and then co-opted onto the Demonstration Sub-committee as well as chairing the Press Sub-committee. By July 1922, Burman had to admit that the advertising revenue had dropped further and that the paper was running at a loss of £25 per issue. He was, however, instructed to continue to publish the journal and was granted a further £250 to finance *Straight Forward* for another year.⁶⁰ The Press Sub-committee appeared to have neglected *Straight Forward* in favour of producing a series of leaflets and a printed manifesto for that year's municipal elections.⁶¹ The consequence of this was a financial crisis, revealed in the minutes of a special meeting of the Management Committee in December when Neville Chamberlain pointed out that the Association was spending £7,000 per year, but only raising £4,000 by subscriptions and through funds raised at Demonstrations and other social events.⁶²

As a consequence, the future of *Straight Forward* was discussed in depth at a meeting of the Management Committee in February 1923, with Neville Chamberlain present. Burman pointed out that Percival Jones Ltd had lost the contract to publish the paper and a lower offer had been accepted (by none other than Burman's own company, Burman, Cooper and Co). The £250 allocated by the Management Committee six months earlier had been spent. Burman blamed the crisis on the poor circulation of the paper and the refusal of local Associations to pay for their copies. Neville's wife, Annie Chamberlain, suggested that a 'page for women' (rather than about women's political activities) should be added (in emulation of the *Town Crier*), and the Management Committee agreed that as their 'opponents had a paper circulating very widely' and that the alternative was to rely on leaflets, they would advance a further £100.⁶³ Sadly, however, the BUA had not anticipated that the election of November 1922 would be followed by a further two general elections within the next two years. The effort to prevent a Labour breakthrough in the city would eventually fatally weaken the BUA's ability to maintain a monthly newspaper.

⁵⁹ BUA Central Committee minutes, 17 March 1922.

⁶⁰ BUA Management Committee minutes, 14 July 1922.

⁶¹ BUA Press Sub-committee minutes, 22 September 1922; 29 September 1922.

⁶² BUA Management Committee minutes, 29 December 1922.

⁶³ BUA Management Committee minutes, 9 February 1923.

In April 1923, the Management Committee was forced to report to the Central Committee that the production of 'three special editions of *Straight Forward*' for the general and municipal elections had resulted in the failure to produce issues in December 1922 and February 1923. Although the Committee announced its intention to resume monthly publication, it was noted that there was 'a healthy rivalry' for BUA resources between the Carnival (as the annual Demonstration had been re-titled) and the newspaper and that the finances of the newspaper still remained fragile.⁶⁴ These were further strained by the need for a further special edition for the municipal elections in October 1923 and then a further special edition, hurriedly printed for the snap general election in December. In November 1923, Burman was forced to admit to the Management Committee that 'the publication had no funds left.' The Committee chairman did point out that the Management Committee had actually authorised £1,000 to be spent on the paper in its first year and that only £804 had been spent in the whole three years of the paper's existence. A further £200 was advanced to the limited company and the directors of the paper were thanked profusely for their 'excellent election number'.⁶⁵ The expense paid off and, against the national trend, the Unionists of Birmingham, as in 1906, withstood the national party's defeat and held all the Birmingham seats (although Herbert Austin's majority in King's Norton was reduced to 1,554). The BUA was forced to find a further £250 to keep the paper afloat as early as March 1924, and admitted in September that it was costing £300 a year to publish the paper.⁶⁶ Burman now voiced the opinion to the Management Committee that the paper's 'most necessary functions had now to some extent gone' now that the support of the *Mail* and the *Post* was stronger than it had been in 1919 and that 'in his opinion *Straight Forward* would [...] have to cease.' He proposed a further edition 'once or twice a year, when found necessary'. Some others suggested making use of a local insert in either *The Man in the Street* (which had replaced the *Popular View* in May 1924) or the women's Unionist paper, *Home and Politics*, but Burman was not keen, noting that 'it was not the first of [Central Office's] adventures in this direction and it did not seem to him in any way to compete with the daily newspapers.'⁶⁷

⁶⁴ BUA Central Committee minutes, 13 April 1923.

⁶⁵ BUA Management Committee minutes, 9 November 1923.

⁶⁶ BUA Finance Sub-committee minutes, 14 March 1924.

⁶⁷ BUA Management Committee minutes, 12 September 1924.

As Burman planned, the paper continued every month until October 1924, happily lambasting MacDonald's Labour government, but it was clearly over-stretched by the combination of general and municipal elections on 29 October and 1 November respectively. Although there was a call for a special General Election edition, Burman's death knell had reduced enthusiasm for the project and 'it was decided that coverage for October be confined to the Municipal number.'⁶⁸ The October 1924 edition of *Straight Forward* duly only included three references to the General Election, above the mast head and in the editorial column. There were no profiles of the general election candidates, in contrast to the vibrant election edition of the *Town Crier*. The result was Labour's first general election breakthrough in the city, taking King's Norton from Austin in 1924 with a majority of 133 and coming within 78 votes of unseating Neville Chamberlain in Ladywood. This was in contrast to the Unionists' triumph in the municipal elections when the party won twenty of the twenty five seats being contested. The decision to end the regular appearance of *Straight Forward* as a monthly was not rescinded, however, and the next edition of the publication after October 1924 was not until April 1925. Money was spent instead on the organisation of new central party offices (in a building named Empire House), funding of the annual Empire Carnival/Demonstration and the highly popular women's organisation's 'socials, dances, whist drives and children's parties.' Burman became distracted with the organisation of a football league for the junior branches.⁶⁹ *Straight Forward* only appeared as election issues for the rest of the inter-war period, the only exception being a twelve page special edition in July 1936 to mark the centenary of the birth of Joseph Chamberlain. Into the gap left by *Straight Forward*, local Associations launched their own papers to challenge the *Town Crier*, such as Yardley which launched *Progress* in 1925.⁷⁰ These fared equally poorly and most lasted less than a year. There was a brief discussion in 1926 as to reviving *Straight Forward* as a monthly, but Burman was adamant that such a paper was not merely redundant but actually a financial drain.⁷¹ Despite Burman's pessimism, *The Man in the Street*, with its strong use of cartoons and satire and *Home and Politics*, with its portraits of unlikely Unionist pin-ups [fig. 3], cookery and gardening pages, proved far more enduring, lasting until 1929 (when they amalgamated into *Home and Empire*) and helped to fill the gap

⁶⁸ BUA Management Committee minutes, 12 September 1924.

⁶⁹ BUA Central Council minutes, 1 May 1925; 6 November 1925.

⁷⁰ Yardley Division Unionist Association report, 12 February 1926.

⁷¹ BUA Management Committee minutes, 11 June 1926.

that *Straight Forward* had left. The *Birmingham Post* and the *Birmingham Mail* remained steadfast supporters of the Unionist cause and exploited the growing popular disillusion with the Labour Party after 1924 very effectively. On the national stage, this was the age of Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* which effectively claimed to be impartial and avoided the extreme anti-socialism of the *Daily Mail* (and even the *Times*) whilst endorsing Baldwin's leadership.⁷² It was not as if the Unionist voter was short of alternative reading material, once *Straight Forward* ceased to be published regularly. As Geraint Thomas suggests, *Straight Forward*'s launch can be read as an attempt by the Birmingham Unionists 'to augment the local as the site of political competition' but its decline demonstrated the weakness of an overtly party political publication, no matter how well designed, in an age of weakening public identification with party labels.⁷³

⁷² Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Labour Party*, 76-77.

⁷³ Thomas, 'Political Modernity and 'Government' in the Construction of Inter-War Democracy: Local and National Encounters', in Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas, eds., *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 2011), 44. Thomas, in common with most commentators, incorrectly refers to the Birmingham Unionist Association as 'Conservatives'.



Figure 3. Front cover of *Home and Politics*, no. 28, August 1923

Ironically, while the Labour party finally achieved a significant breakthrough in Birmingham in 1924, the party itself was bitterly divided and the *Town Crier* had inadvertently revealed this throughout its publication history. As early as September 1920, W. J. Chamberlain had turned against his previous radical allies and attacked them for 'wild and meaningless outbursts that merely provide the anti-Labour forces with excellent propaganda material.'⁷⁴ In the same month, he criticised trade unions for resorting too quickly to 'the clumsy weapon of the strike.'⁷⁵ Chamberlain began to promote a far more emollient image for Labour, printing an article which claimed that 'the Labour party

⁷⁴ *Town Crier*, 10 September 1920.

⁷⁵ *Town Crier*, 17 September 1920.

programme comes nearer to expressing the Christian ideals than any other'⁷⁶ and welcoming the decision of Ramsay MacDonald to form a minority government in January 1924.⁷⁷ This latter decision opened a rift with Joseph Southall, a key funder of the Birmingham Labour Movement, who wrote to the paper claiming that 'in the long run [...] a semi-Labour government [will] be found to be worse than no Labour government at all.' Chamberlain responded that 'semi-criticism may be found in the long run to be worse than no criticism at all.'⁷⁸ Finally, in 1924, the decision of the Birmingham Labour party, of which W. J. Chamberlain was by this point the president, to invite Oswald Mosley to contest Neville Chamberlain's seat in Ladywood proved too much for some.⁷⁹ The hard-left journal, the *Worker*, acerbically commented 'the game was to find some stupid, devoted old worker who had worked up to within sight of victory and then push the mug out by getting a tame ILP branch to nominate Mosley.'⁸⁰ Chamberlain angrily responded by calling this article 'a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end.'⁸¹ Chamberlain's move away from hard left socialism appeared to be justified in 1924, following Robert Dennison's victory in Kings Norton, and the headline 'Birmingham Labour breaks through!' was accompanied by an angry editorial attacking the tactics of the *Birmingham Mail* commenting that 'of one thing I am sure and that is that the putrid stuff put out by the *Mail* during the campaign was so bad that it stank even in the nostrils of many of those who have hitherto supported the Unionist Party.'⁸²

Part of Labour's success was that the *Town Crier* had become a far less overtly party political publication than *Straight Forward*, continuing the vibrant print culture of pre-war Birmingham by including book and theatre reviews, a children's page, a gardening column, a serial story and items on socialist history. As Thackeray has commented, this was 'emblematic of its vigorous attempts to engage with the daily life of working families.'⁸³ By

⁷⁶ H. Dunnico, 'The Churches and Labour' *Town Crier*, 7 December 1923.

⁷⁷ *Town Crier*, 25 January 1924.

⁷⁸ *Town Crier*, 5 September 1924.

⁷⁹ The influence of the *Town Crier* was clearly felt by Neville Chamberlain as his papers contain the 25 July 1924 edition of the *Town Crier* in which Mosley was announced as 'New Labour Champion for Ladywood' and, most threateningly, 'His Challenge to Neville Chamberlain'. NC5/10/29. Neville Chamberlain also discussed the *Town Crier* with his wife. Neville Chamberlain to Annie Chamberlain, 8 August 1924, NC1/26/334.

⁸⁰ Quoted in *Birmingham Gazette*, 13 August 1924. Mosley was in fact, nominated by none other than Ramsay MacDonald. R. MacDonald to Oswald Mosley, 23 October 1924, Cadbury Research Library, OMD1/1/6.

⁸¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 14 August 1924.

⁸² *Town Crier*, 31 October 1924.

⁸³ Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age*, 133.

contrast, *Straight Forward* failed to print anything more than encomiums of party leaders, details of Unionist events and endless exhortations for 'armchair Unionists' to rouse themselves.⁸⁴ Even with the backing of local Unionist businesses such as Mitchells and Butlers, Bird's of Wolverhampton and Birmingham Small Arms, *Straight Forward* was only ever a monthly publication, with often more illustrations than editorial material, while *Town Crier* survived as a weekly until after the Second World War, despite only carrying adverts from Westwood's (kitchenware) and the S. M. Company ('shirts and overalls [...] made by trade union labour') in its early editions and only achieving an estimated circulation of 1,500 copies.⁸⁵ Unlike readers of *Straight Forward*, however, which faced many political alternatives in its market, as the *Town Crier* was the only Birmingham Labour paper, perhaps the readership of each issue was far higher than these figures suggest.⁸⁶ Adrian Bingham has described the state of the national Labour press in the 1920s as too party-political and out of touch with its working class audience, a problem of left-wing papers that Chamberlain clearly avoided with his range of popular features that an editor such as George Lansbury would have deprecated.⁸⁷ The survival of the *Town Crier* was also due to the response to regular appeals for financial support (in a similar fashion to those which kept the *Daily Herald* afloat⁸⁸) such as that issued to local trade unionists in November 1920.⁸⁹ W. J. Chamberlain swiftly became a powerful figure in West Midlands Labour politics, being elected to the Labour Joint Executive Committee in September 1922.⁹⁰ It was Chamberlain's support for Mosley that led to the Birmingham Labour Party inviting him to contest Ladywood in 1924 and Smethwick in 1926. This alienated influential figures within the Labour Movement such as Southall and Robert Dunstan, who had contested Ladywood in 1922 and 1923 and led to the Independent Labour Party (ILP) refusing to invite *Town Crier*

⁸⁴ See for example, 'Wake Up, Men! Curse and Danger of Apathy', *Straight Forward*, June 1923.

⁸⁵ *Town Crier*, 10 October 1919; Drake, 'The *Town Crier*: Birmingham's Labour Weekly, 1919-1951', 103-126. The editor of the *Town Crier*, W. J. Chamberlain, sought 'immediate financial assistance' for his paper from the Birmingham Borough Labour Party within six months of its launch; Archives and Collections, Library of Birmingham, 329.94249, Birmingham Borough Labour Party Minutes of Meetings Vol.1 1919-21, 12 February 1920. In September 1923, Mitchells and Butlers ceased to advertise in *Straight Forward* and, from 30 November 1923, advertised in *Town Crier* instead.

⁸⁶ John Boughton suggested that the *Town Crier*'s importance was as 'mouthpiece, informant and source of identity' for the Birmingham Labour movement. John Boughton, 'Working Class Politics in Birmingham and Sheffield, 1918-1931', PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1985, 168.

⁸⁷ Adrian Bingham, 'Representing the People? The *Daily Mirror*, Class and Political Culture in Inter-War Britain', in Beers, and Thomas, eds., *Brave New World*, 109-128, 113-16.

⁸⁸ Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Labour Party*, 77.

⁸⁹ Birmingham Borough Labour Party minute book, i, 1919-21.

⁹⁰ Birmingham Borough Labour Party minute book, i, 1919-2121 September 1922.

reporters to their meetings.⁹¹ Chamberlain's strategy was, however vindicated, as the Birmingham Labour party finally took more than a single seat in the 1929 election, winning half of Birmingham's seats, unseating Arthur Steel-Maitland in Erdington and capturing Ladywood (although Neville Chamberlain had retreated to Edgbaston).

Among the Labour activists, the moderate 'Labour Church' movement which had been particularly powerful in pre-war Birmingham, was revived by the Birmingham branch of the ILP, but, although there is no indication from the pages of the *Town Crier* that this movement reached an audience beyond existing ILP members, other Labour publications give the impression of genuinely religious-focused meetings.⁹² It seems from the evidence, however, that the Labour churches arose both from the genuine religious convictions of many of the Birmingham Labour figures, such as the Quaker, Joseph Southall, but also as a means of disproving Unionist press attacks on Labour as supporters or fellow-travellers of the 'godless Bolsheviks'. The use of 'Bolshevism' as a synonym for Labour, was not fully supported by the Birmingham Unionist press, however, despite its frequent employment by right wing Unionist politicians (and impassioned Unionist journalists at election time).⁹³ The *Birmingham Mail* was quite content to refer to the Labour party without qualification, even though it referred to the *Daily Herald* as 'the Bolshevik Organ'⁹⁴, while the *Birmingham Post* used the term 'Labour' in inverted commas until 1921 (as did the national Unionist newsletter, *Gleanings and Memoranda*⁹⁵). *Straight Forward* preferred to refer to its chief opponents in the city as 'the socialists'. As an editorial explained in November 1924

The candidates in opposition to those of the Unionist party are, almost without exception, described as "Labour" There is no greater misnomer than this. The word "Labour" is used because at election times it is more attractive than "Socialism" mere party expediency suggests its use. Of course a "Labour" candidate has a right

⁹¹ Drake, 'The *Town Crier: Birmingham's Labour Weekly, 1919-1951*', 112.

⁹² Minutes of the Birmingham city branch of the Independent Labour Party 1915-1921, 3 March 1917; George John Barnsby, *Socialism in Birmingham and the Black Country 1850-1939* (Wolverhampton: Integrated Publishing Services, 1998), 353-56. See also: Jacqueline Turner, 'Labour's Lost Soul? Recovering the Labour Church', in Matthew Worley, ed., *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives 1900-39* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 153-169.

⁹³ G. W. Hubbard reported that Lloyd George referred to the Labour press as 'Bolshevist and ILP agents' when he met Neville Chamberlain in January 1920. Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 11 January 1920, NC18/1/239.

⁹⁴ *Birmingham Mail*, 16 April 1921.

⁹⁵ *Gleanings and Memoranda*, January 1924, Conservative Party archive, Bodleian library, Oxford, XFilms 64/5.

to be a Socialist if he believes in Socialism. But if he is a Socialist he should call himself a Socialist so that persons may know what they are voting for.⁹⁶

Although Laura Beers appeared to suggest that this was a successful strategy, we would argue that this lack of consistency in the Unionist propaganda was a weakness which Labour in Birmingham was clearly able to exploit, especially in the 1919 and 1921 municipal elections.⁹⁷ The *Birmingham Gazette* mocked Chamberlain's attempt to 'waggle' 'the Bolshevik bogey' in the first issue of *Straight Forward*.⁹⁸ *Straight Forward* continued with this strategy until 1921 with little success, if the municipal election results of that year are any indication of success.⁹⁹ The Liberals also used the claim to ridicule their Unionist opponents, noting in a pamphlet in 1919: 'some people think that every member of the Labour party is a Revolutionist or a Bolshevist. But that is absurd.'¹⁰⁰ In March 1922, Neville Chamberlain opined to his sister that 'to go to the country purely on economy and anti-Socialism seems bad tactics to me'¹⁰¹ and he was supported in this by Leo Amery, the MP for Sparkbrook.¹⁰² It is noticeable that after this date, the Unionist press promoted a more 'constructive approach' with the *Birmingham Post's* 1922 municipal election coverage beginning with a report of the Unionist slogan 'Cheaper Houses, Small Houses, Many Houses.'¹⁰³ The result was startling, with Labour losing such working class wards as Balsall Heath, Small Heath, Soho and Sparkbrook. The *Birmingham Post* could confidently state that 'the Labour assault has been firmly met.'¹⁰⁴ Although the anti-socialist message never disappeared from the Birmingham Unionist press, especially once Labour formed a minority government in 1924, the use of 'Bolshevism' as a term of abuse for Labour seems to have subsided after this point. Baldwin's inter-war success was to incorporate the Labour party into the national polity and so he was reluctant to endorse such over-exaggerated and insulting behaviour towards his fellow-Parliamentarians once he became leader, even in 1924 at the height of the 'Red Scare'. Neville Chamberlain may not always have been as

⁹⁶ "'Labour' means Socialism', *Straight Forward*, November 1924.

⁹⁷ Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Labour Party*, 56-7.

⁹⁸ *Birmingham Gazette*, 3 September 1920.

⁹⁹ See for example, *Straight Forward*, October 1921.

¹⁰⁰ *The Real Aims of the Labour Party*, Liberal Party pamphlet 1919/14, National Liberal Club archive, London.

¹⁰¹ Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 26 March 1922, quoted in Robert Self, ed., *Neville Chamberlain Diary Letters Vol Two: The Reform Years, 1921-27* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 104.

¹⁰² Notes for Unionist Workers and Speakers, December 1921 Leo Amery Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge, AMEL 4/9.

¹⁰³ *Birmingham Post*, 27 October 1922.

¹⁰⁴ *Birmingham Post*, 2 November 1922.

scrupulous, but he too ensured that public discourse became more substantive and less abusive after 1923.¹⁰⁵ The *Birmingham Mail* launched a charitable fund, similar to work carried out by Annie Chamberlain and Smedley Crooke, MP for Deritend.¹⁰⁶ In this way, the Birmingham Unionist press became increasingly moderate under Neville Chamberlain's influence, just as W. J. Chamberlain was achieving the same for the Labour press.

In the national and municipal elections between 1918 and 1924, the lack of a clear denominational divide between the parties was consistently noted by the whole spectrum of the local press and the attempts of long-serving Liberals to appeal to nonconformist consciences had very limited effect as Robert Outhwaite, David Mason, John Wilson and Richard Fairbairn all soon discovered.¹⁰⁷ As Thackeray noted, 'many of the issues which had rallied the Nonconformist conscience carried little weight in politics after the First World War.'¹⁰⁸ Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain both continued the tradition, begun by Joseph Chamberlain in the 1880s, of appealing to the nonconformist tradition as part of British civic identity rather than as a separate entity and then delivering the votes of this community to the Unionist cause.¹⁰⁹ In addition, Peter Catterall has demonstrated that nonconformity continued to inform the views of many within the Labour Party after 1918.¹¹⁰ The only religious group clearly excluded from the national collective was 'the Jew' who was frequently associated with Bolshevism in both Germany and Russia in Unionist publications and was frequently the butt of jokes regarding his assumed untrustworthiness and 'cosmopolitan' identity.¹¹¹ As Stuart Ball has noted, 'there certainly was an under-current of

¹⁰⁵ Phillip Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 222-23.

¹⁰⁶ BUA minutes, 12 December 1924; The *Town Crier* complained that the *Birmingham Mail* fund was used for unfair political advantage in the city, *Town Crier*, 13 January 1922.

¹⁰⁷ Outhwaite came a poor third in Hanley in 1918. Mason came last in the poll of six candidates in Coventry in Dec. 1918 and Wilson lost the seat which he had held for 27 years in 1922 – the first time he had faced a Unionist candidate. Fairbairn lost three of the four elections he contested in Worcester in the period, in 1918, 1922 and 1924.

¹⁰⁸ Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in British Politics* (London: Batsford, 1975), 174-7; Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values*, 354-55.

¹¹⁰ See for example, Peter Catterall, *Labour and the Free Churches, 1918-1939: Radicalism, Righteousness and Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), Peter Catterall, 'The Distinctiveness of British Socialism? Religion and the Rise of Labour, c.1900-39', in Matthew Worley, ed., *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-39* (London: Routledge, 2009), 131-152.

¹¹¹ See *Straight Forward*, especially September 1920 and September 1921.

anti-Semitism in Conservative [and Unionist] circles' especially in the febrile atmosphere of post-war Europe.¹¹²

In the place of religious festivals and events, Labour and Unionist publications sought to develop their own calendar of cultural activities as an attempt to replace the denominational ceremonies and events which had dominated many people's social lives in the years before 1914, thereby taking their political rivalry into the public behaviour of the city. For the Labour Party, this meant the celebration of the socialist May Day. The event had a long pedigree, but was revived in 1920 as a means of protesting against the Trade Union Bill, with a procession through central London to Hyde Park.¹¹³ That organised by the Birmingham Labour Party in 1920 was relatively modest, but, with W. J. Chamberlain co-opted onto the Sub-committee in 1922, the event expanded into a public display of floats on lorries, depicting 'Labour marching (of all ranks) under Labour's banner.'¹¹⁴ *Straight Forward* therefore championed the existing 'Empire Day' as a rival day of celebration and its growing scale appears to have developed as a response to the success of the May Day celebrations, especially once a Labour government was in office and able to channel the resources of the state towards their feast day. The Unionist 'Demonstration' was first held in 1920 and according to Neville Chamberlain, 'there was a great crowd'¹¹⁵. The Empire Day celebrations grew out of this event, adapting an event that had been largely only celebrated by scouting organisations and schools in the Midlands hitherto.¹¹⁶ The first mention of Empire Day in *Straight Forward* was in the June 1924 edition. However, unlike the pre-war celebrations which dated back to Lord Meath's establishment of Queen Victoria's birthday (24 May) as a day of celebration of Britain's 'glorious Empire', in Birmingham, as elsewhere, the post-war

¹¹² Ball, *Portrait of a Party*, 65; Geoffrey Russell Searle, *Corruption in British Politics, 1895-1930* (Oxford, 1987), 328-337. It must be noted that there was evidence of racial prejudice within the Birmingham Labour Party as well, as a meeting of the party in 1920 unanimously approved a motion which protested against 'the invasion of Germany by black troops' and called on the government 'to secure the withdrawal of this menace from Europe.', Birmingham Borough Labour Party minute book, i, 1919-21, 15 April 1920.

¹¹³ *The Sphere*, 8 May 1920.

¹¹⁴ Minutes of Labour Party meeting, Birmingham Borough Labour Party Minutes of Meetings i 1919-21, 15 January 1920; Minutes of Labour Party May Day Sub-committee meeting, 27 April 1923, Birmingham Borough Labour Party Minutes of Meetings ii, 1921-1924.

¹¹⁵ Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 19 September 1920, NC18/1/272.

¹¹⁶ Jim English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958' *Historical Journal* 49/1 (2006), 247-276; Neville Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 18 September 1920, NC18/1/272; *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 May 1921.

emphasis was on the contribution of the Empire in the Great War.¹¹⁷ The increased scale of the event was stimulated by the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley which had opened in April and by a preceding 'Empire Shopping Week' in which the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce attempted to 'reproduce the Wembley atmosphere.'¹¹⁸ The timing of holding such an overtly patriotic event with a Labour government in office was clearly influential in stimulating the Unionists to such heights of activity. The event itself was substantial, with tableaux, pageants, parades, motor car processions, decorated lorries, musical entertainments and speeches.¹¹⁹ Spurred into a response, the Birmingham Labour Party organised a similar event on their 'feast day' on 3 May 1925, with, as the *Birmingham Gazette* reported, a procession to Calthorpe Park of trade unions, Labour parties, the co-operative movement, guild socialists, young socialists' leaguers and girls' labour clubs - 15,000 people in total.¹²⁰ With a Unionist government in power, however, the scale of Empire Day diminished in 1925 and it once again became an event involving 'school children, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides and Grammar School Cadets' (marred by a typical English spring downpour).¹²¹

David Thackeray has already identified that the local Conservative party organisations in the West Midlands were very effective at directing their message towards the newly enfranchised female voters.¹²² J. B. Burman, the head of the Publication Subcommittee which had founded *Straight Forward* in 1920, had also been the first, in the same year, to suggest the appointment of 'a lady organiser, to organise the Women's Associations throughout the City.'¹²³ Burman's wife served on the Women's Section of the city's Unionist Management Committee alongside Annie Chamberlain, which may explain the prominence given to women's meetings in the early years of the newspaper. This strong female involvement in the activities of the party in the West Midlands was also reflected in the national Unionist publication, *Home and Politics*. Both Lucy Baldwin and Annie Chamberlain appeared on the front cover of the magazine and contributed to the publication. The

¹¹⁷ English, 'Empire Day in Britain, 1904-1958', 261-62; Neville Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 23 May 1924, NC18/1/437.

¹¹⁸ *Birmingham Gazette*, 19 May 1924.

¹¹⁹ *Straight Forward*, June 1924.

¹²⁰ *Birmingham Gazette*, 4 May 1925.

¹²¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 26 May 1925.

¹²² Thackeray, *Conservatism for the Democratic Age*, 140-48.

¹²³ BUA, Management Committee minutes, 8 October 1920. A Miss Alice Pratt was eventually appointed at a salary of £200 p.a. in March 1922. BUA, Management Committee minutes, 10 February 1922.

Birmingham women's organisation, like its male counter-parts, preferred its autonomy from national direction, however. There are no references to Birmingham activities in the regular column 'Our work in the constituencies' until after the demise of *Straight Forward* in 1924 – it was clearly accepted that Birmingham needed no assistance from outside the city. The Unionist newspapers proved much better at appealing to women, as well. The *Birmingham Mail* featured a prominent woman's page entitled 'Everywoman: Dress, the Home, Women's work and Play' with a variety of issues covered. The page from 3 November 1919, for example, covered 'Paris Fashions', 'Should Women Smoke?' and 'Duties of a War Pensions Secretary' with an illustration of the latest Paris fashions [fig. 4]. The Lib-Lab *Birmingham Gazette* which had hitherto largely focused on sporting news (with a whole page given to football every week) was forced to respond, producing its own illustrated 'Gazette Home Page for Woman Readers' with fashion advice, film news, society gossip, household tips and a serial from November 1922¹²⁴. The *Birmingham Post*, though clearly aimed at a masculine, business audience, eventually attempted to widen its appeal with a 'Women's Correspondent' column (but only on the penultimate page) from 1921. Perhaps more significantly, it also halved its price to 1d in 1921.¹²⁵ Laura Beers has noted that although such stereotypical topics as fashion, consumerism and society gossip may have upheld gender divisions in the inter-war period, they may reflect 'a broader restructuring of the relationship between politicians and the democratic nation' and that by employing such approaches, Unionist publication may have made their message more understandable and made it easier for a non-partisan voter to endorse it at election time.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ *Birmingham Gazette*, 8 November 1922.

¹²⁵ Whates, *The Birmingham Post 1857: 1957: a Centenary Retrospect*, 190-91.

¹²⁶ Laura Beers, "'A Timid Disbelief in the Equality to which Lip Service is Constantly Paid': Gender, Politics and the Press between the Wars', in Beers, Thomas, eds., *Brave New World*, 129-148, 148.



Figure 4. Birmingham Mail, 3 November 1919

For the Labour party the situation was reversed. The national party produced a journal called *Labour Woman* as early as 1913 which was distributed by the local party after

the war.¹²⁷ W. J. Chamberlain did his best with limited resources, announcing in September 1920 that a women's page with 'social questions, housekeeping, home dressmaking, and other topics will be introduced.'¹²⁸ Although it is difficult to be conclusive, given the limited circulation of the *Town Crier*, it is possible to see the seeds of Labour's breakthrough in Birmingham and across the country in the 1929 general election, in the ability of Labour newspapers to appeal to a female audience.¹²⁹

Finally, one must consider the position of the Liberals, never a strong party in Birmingham since the split of 1886 and the Birmingham Liberal Association's decision to adopt Unionism in 1887. The limited attempts of the national party to adapt to the new political print culture and the failure to provide local newspapers with sufficient material stymied the party's attempt to stage a revival. The *Birmingham Gazette* increasingly supported Labour candidates (as 'Progressives'¹³⁰) and carried adverts for the *Town Crier* and national publications such as the *Liberal Flashlight* (only four pages long and with insufficient circulation) proved inadequate [fig. 5].

¹²⁷ Minutes of Labour Party meeting, 15 January 1920, Birmingham Borough Labour Party Minutes, i 1919-21.

¹²⁸ *Town Crier*, 25 September 1924.

¹²⁹ Beers, *Your Britain: Media and the Labour Party*, 130-21.

¹³⁰ For example see *Birmingham Gazette*, 1 November 1920.

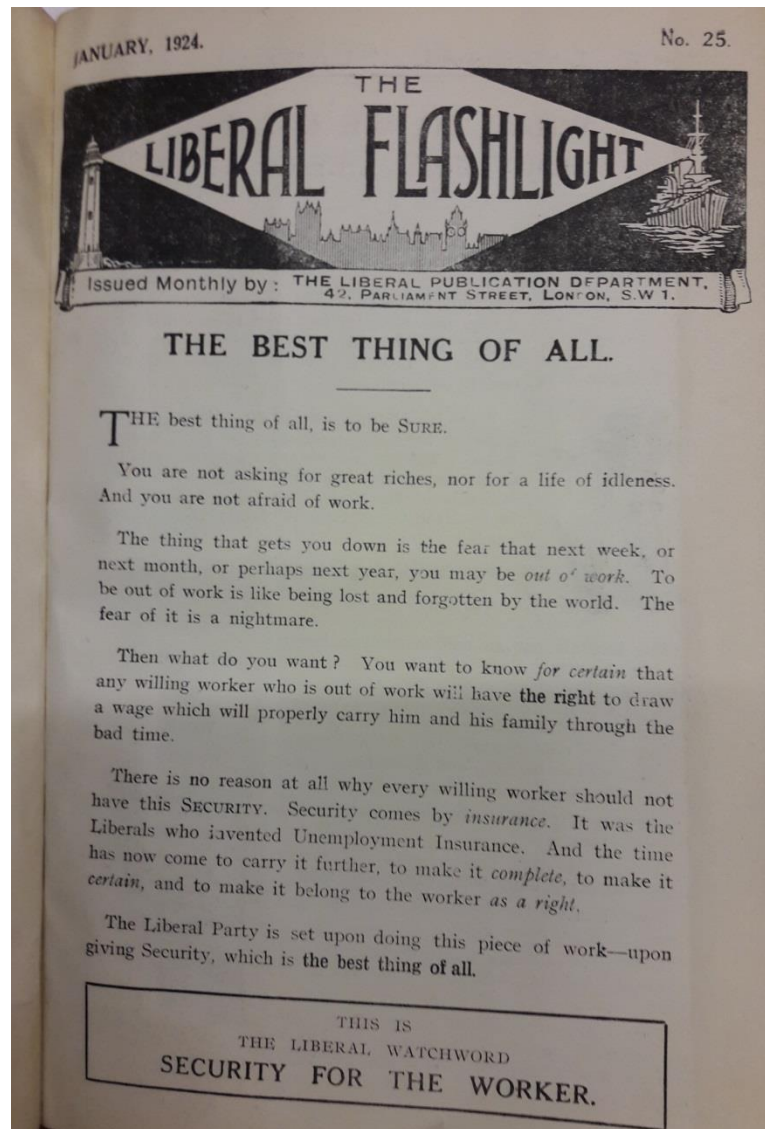


Figure 5 The *Liberal Flashlight*, no. 25, January 1924

George Cadbury jnr., who had already switched his financial support to the ILP before the war, finally resigned from his local association in Selly Oak and announced that he was severing his long connection with the party. He subsequently joined the Birmingham Central Labour Party.¹³¹ However, the example of Richard Fairbairn in Worcester provides a convincing case that Liberalism was by no means dead in the West Midlands. Fairbairn had taken advantage of the support of a local newspaper company, the Worcestershire Newspapers and General Printing Company, and his own reputation in the city as a local councillor and Food Transport Officer for the Midlands, to fight back against the power of the Conservative Association, which had bought its way to power in the pre-war years and

¹³¹ *Birmingham Gazette*, 24 January 1920; 15 October 1920. Later that year, Cadbury wrote to the *Daily News* urging Liberal and Labour organisations to form a progressive coalition. *Daily News*, 6 October 1920.

which controlled the *Berrow's Worcester Journal* and the *Worcestershire Times*.¹³² Despite the exaggerated claims of the strongly right-wing Worcester Conservative press¹³³, the editor of the *Worcestershire Echo*, W. G. R Stone and Fairbairn refused to block the growth of the local Labour party and encouraged fellow Liberals to copy their hard work, in much the same way that that *Daily News* supported the Poplar councillors in 1920.¹³⁴ In addition, they defended Labour politicians from Conservative attacks. In response to the accusation that Labour councillors were increasing rates, the *Worcestershire Echo* noted how 'Labour members are less to blame than any half-dozen Tory councillors'.¹³⁵ However, whilst providing support to a fledgling Labour Party in Worcester, the Liberal press recognised the potential impact they posed to Liberal election successes. In 1924, the *Worcestershire Echo* reported that a vote for Labour would result in a victory for the Conservatives.¹³⁶ The newspaper was certainly a platform for Fairbairn who remarked in 1921 that the *Worcestershire Echo* 'was where his views were represented'.¹³⁷ Whilst Labour had the potential to split the Liberal vote, a key oversight of the Worcestershire Liberal press (and the area's press culture in general) was its neglect of the female electorate. In contrast to Birmingham, where the Labour and Unionist press reported the activities of women in politics, the press in Worcestershire did little to interact with female voters. In July 1924, for instance, the *Worcestershire Echo* contained a small column, 'Woman's World', which discussed Lady Frances Balfour's views on women's fashion, and featured another small paragraph entitled 'Bottling Fruit'.¹³⁸

The lack of attention given to the role women in political matters by the Worcestershire Press, however, did not prevent Liberal election successes. In 1922 their tenacity paid off when Fairbairn finally won the Worcester seat. It was a pyrrhic victory however, for he held it for little over a year and was defeated in December 1923 as the farming vote forcefully backed Baldwin's protectionist manifesto and a Labour candidate spilt the anti-Tory vote. Despite the dominance of Baldwin in Worcestershire politics from

¹³² Denise Mylechreest, 'A Singular Liberal: Richard Robert Fairbairn and Worcester Politics, 1899-1941', MPhil thesis, University of Worcester, 2007, 51-76.

¹³³ See for example *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, 21 May 1921.

¹³⁴ *Worcestershire Echo*, 1 November 1920; 3 November 1920; *Birmingham Post*, 3 April 1939.

¹³⁵ *Worcestershire Echo*, 30 October 1920.

¹³⁶ *Worcestershire Echo*, 21 October 1924.

¹³⁷ *Worcestershire Echo*, 2 November 1921.

¹³⁸ *Worcestershire Echo*, 1 July 1924.

that point onwards, Fairbairn remained at the centre of politics in Worcester, with the backing of a strong local Liberal Association and the *Worcestershire Echo* and he stood, although unsuccessfully, in the Parliamentary elections of 1924, 1929, 1931 and 1935.¹³⁹ The Liberals in Worcester managed to fight off the Labour challenge for the Parliamentary seat, with the *Echo* claiming that they were 'working together [with the Tories] for the continuance of the Conservative misrepresentation of the city.'¹⁴⁰ Fairbairn eventually became Mayor of Worcester.¹⁴¹ The support of the independent Worcestershire Newspaper Company which, until 1930, ran the pro-Liberal *Worcestershire Echo*, *Worcester Herald*, and *Worcestershire Chronicle*,¹⁴² was crucial in resisting the apparently inevitable decline of the Liberal party in the 1920s.¹⁴³

The debate on the concept of 'modernity' in British political culture has, in recent years shifted its focus away from the late nineteenth to the First World War and the post-war years.¹⁴⁴ Although the term 'modernity' remains ill-defined and elusive, the features of political modernity have been assumed to include the growth of a 'national politics' – one in which issues such as international affairs and class and gender issues in political debate replaced the focus on local issues such as municipal government, the personalities of individual regional MPs and the denominational character of the regions of Britain.¹⁴⁵ As the *Birmingham Gazette* noted as early as October 1920, the growing significance of national political events such as country-wide strikes, did challenge interest in local politics, such as

¹³⁹ Andrew J. Taylor, 'Stanley Baldwin, Heresthetics and the Realignment of British politics', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35/3 (2005), 429-463.

¹⁴⁰ *Worcestershire Echo*, 21 October 1924. Labour only overtook the Liberal vote in one Parliamentary election in Worcester, in 1929, for the whole of the interwar period.

¹⁴¹ Mylechreest, 'A Singular Liberal: Richard Robert Fairbairn and Worcester Politics, 1899-1941', 180.

¹⁴² *Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 6 January 1930.

¹⁴³ Recent research has demonstrated that Liberal ideas continued to inform British politics after the First World War. See for example: Ewen Green and Duncan Tanner, eds., *The Strange Survival of Liberal England: Political Leaders, Moral Values and the Reception of Economic Debate* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007); Robert F. Haggard, *The Persistence of Victorian Liberalism: The Politics of Social Reform in Britain, 1870-1900* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁴ Martin Daunton and Bernhard Rieger, eds., *Meaning of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Simon Gunn, James Vernon, eds., *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2011); Jon Lawrence, 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War', *Past & Present* 190 (2006), 185-216; Thomas, 'Political Modernity and 'government' in the Construction of Inter-War Democracy', in Beers and Thomas, eds., *Brave New World*, 39-66.

¹⁴⁵ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain became Modern* (Berkley CA: University of California Press, 2014), 1-17.

the municipal elections.¹⁴⁶ This study has sought to confirm that the West Midlands still retained a prized distinctive political character after the war and that the focus of the provincial political press remained to refract national issues to suit the interests and concerns of the citizens of Birmingham and Worcestershire. As the failure of *Straight Forward*, the financial woes of the *Town Crier* and the partisan nature of political discourse in the provincial press demonstrate however, this distinctiveness was increasingly under assault by the post-war tendency to centralise political organisation, to focus on issues of industrial conflict and foreign policy and the influence of the national press, typified by Beaverbrook and Rothermere's newspapers. Charles Hyde may have fought off the attempt by the Rothermere press to break his near-monopoly of the Birmingham press, but he admitted that he never recovered from the bitterness of the General Strike which pit printers against journalists and managers.¹⁴⁷ The *Worcestershire Echo* may have been the most innovative newspaper in the Cathedral city in the inter-war years, but the Liberal Party never won 30% of the vote after 1923. The *Town Crier* was able to mobilise a moderate message that won six Birmingham seats for Labour in 1929, but these were swept away in the 'Doctors' Mandate' election of 1931. Between 1920 and 1924, provincial journalists in the West Midlands struggled to articulate and defend a distinctive provincial political culture, but if the pattern of West Midland politics survived to any extent after the General Strike, it was largely due to the influence of Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain at Westminster. It was these two Midland politicians, ill at ease with the metropolitan politics and culture of the St James clubs and networks, who practised an inclusive and 'constructive' form of Unionism with great success between 1923 and 1937. The development for a 'national politics', albeit in a Midlands mould, was, despite the best efforts of the Starmer press, W. J. Chamberlain, G. W. Hubbard, J. B. Burman and countless others in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands, already well underway before the National Government was born in 1931.

¹⁴⁶ *Birmingham Gazette*, 25 October 1920.

¹⁴⁷ Whates, *The Birmingham Post 1857: 1957*, 192-93, 196.